

Stepping Into Your Own World: Lessons From American Hardcore Punk

a. vendetta

THE LESSONS

Ian MacKaye laments as he shouts, “can’t keep up, out of step with the world”¹ on Minor Threat’s 1983 song *Out of Step*, and it resonates with me. I feel like I don’t belong in this time. I feel out of step too. The cover of the album, which has the same name as the song, is a simple drawing of a herd of sheep with one black one hopping away from the group. For me, I view this image as an analogy to Catholicism as well as the idea of a societal outcast. My father was the only one of nine children to decide to leave the family faith. Which meant I was not raised under a particular religion. I often refer to our family as the black sheep of the group.

What do you do when you don’t think you fit into society? What do you do when you find out that your thoughts and feelings resonate with others? How do you even begin to express yourself publicly, especially if you are an introvert like me? I have always disliked school, but I love to learn new things. I am less interested in writing papers because using the written word (especially in an academic way) is an unappealing form of communication to me. I see the world in moving images and speak in moving images, but I had to learn this through doing. Actively

¹ Minor Threat. “Out Of Step, by Minor Threat.” Accessed December 3, 2020.
<https://minorthreat.bandcamp.com/track/out-of-step>.

making mistakes and failing. When the Germs took the stage back in the late 70's, they didn't know or barely knew how to play their instruments.² When I watch them perform on film in *The Decline of Western Civilization Part I*, I am instantly hooked. There is a tangible visual appeal to the splayed and spastic movements of the band. Darby Crash is flailing around on stage, barely putting the microphone to his mouth when he blurts a string of words. Maybe this is all a performance art piece, but maybe that does not matter.

Some of the most significant histories of what it was like to be a part of American Hardcore Punk's first incarnation play out primarily in oral histories passed by word of mouth and through the print medium. The interviews with bands and contributions from fans exist in zines.³ These zines were often handmade, black and white, and printed as cheaply as possible. More current-day first-hand accounts from living bandmembers have been recorded in textbooks that operate as historical accounts.⁴ Fugazi's *Instrument*, which was originally released on VHS, is a fascinating first-hand look at what it was like to go on tour, record music, and exist together as a band touring America in the late 90s.

In the early 2000s, I played Lemp Neighborhood Arts Center in St. Louis, MO, twice with the performance art collective Future Death Toll. We were not a hardcore band, but I think we shared similar aggressiveness and commitment to a DIY approach to our work. Lemp is a neighborhood family drug store turned music venue and community center ran by Mark Sarich. The venue is still around. We performed once in 2009⁵ and once in 2014.⁶ Lemp's website

² "The Decline of Western Civilization (6/7) Germs Perform 'Manimal' (1981) - YouTube." Accessed December 3, 2020. <https://youtu.be/3vuveZtlkKw>.

³ *Book Your Own Fuckin' Life 1* (1992), 1992. http://archive.org/details/byofl_01.

⁴ Blush, Steven. *American Hardcore: A Tribal History*. Port Townsend: Feral House, 2010. Accessed December 9, 2020. ProQuest Ebook Central.

⁵ Myspace. "Photos from FUTURE DEATH TOLL (Futuredeathtoll) on Myspace." Accessed December 3, 2020. <https://myspace.com/futuredeathtoll/mixes/classic-show-posters-411621/photo/138303471>.

⁶ "TALK OF THE TOWN: Relational March." Accessed December 3, 2020. <https://nothappenings.tumblr.com>.

carried the slogan “DIY OR DIE” as a footer to all their site pages.⁷ This website was the first time I remember seeing the term DIY or do it yourself, and by pairing it with the word ‘die,’ it was clear that you had to make a choice. American Hardcore Punk music makes a similar challenge to its listeners, to either get in the pit or get out of the way. American Hardcore Punk is visual and visceral. It is alienating music for those who would feel alienated by society. It is distressing sounds of guitars scraping the bottom of an already empty metal barrel. Death is inevitable, but Hardcore music wants you want to fight till the very last breath.

DIY might mean stand for do it yourself. Still, American Hardcore Punk is about doing it together DIT (which is an updated version of the acronym) because to survive; punks quite literally need to work together. Bands need help printing and hanging flyers, getting venue contacts/booking shows, finding food and shelter, recording music, and ultimately listening to and buying their music. Recording spaces like Inner Ear Recording Studios⁸ (which started as a space in the basement of Don Zientara’s home) have capture sounds of some of the most important local acts that became internationally known household names such as Bad Brains and Fugazi. If it were not for initial and local recording support of this new music style, we might not be hearing it today because at the time, at least for Bad Brains, their sound was not popular mainstream content. The docu-series Sonic Highways, Episode 2, does a beautiful job showing what it was like to record bands like Bad Brains in a small basement in a suburban neighborhood. Zientara even went so far as to run a mic cable to the house’s back yard to isolate the leader singer H.R. from the rest of the band to record his vocals.

⁷ “Lemp Neighborhood Arts Center,” April 6, 2009.

https://web.archive.org/web/20090406031219/http://www.lemp-arts.org/fall08_events.php.

⁸ “Inner Ear Studio.” Accessed December 9, 2020. <http://innerearstudio.com/>.



Figure 1 – *DEBT FREE DEATH*, MiniDV video, Camera Operator Honey McMoney, 2020.

Early Hardcore Punks understood that the world they lived in was full of torment, but I don't think they fully understand that some of their actions or songs could be seen as a part of the problems that plague our society in some ways. For instance, being a cis white straight male is a point of privilege in society. It still is in 2020. This particular group largely dominates American Hardcore Punk from the late 70's – early 80's with notable exceptions like the Bad Brains and several West coast band members like Sothira Pheng of Crucifix or various members of Black Flag: Ron Reyes, Robo, and Spot to name a few. That is not to say that American Hardcore Punk should be seen as a total failure to bring new energy and resistance to a society that values profit over people into being. On the contrary, without Hardcore Punk new genres and movements such as Queercore⁹ or Riot grrrl might not have formed in direct opposition¹⁰ or may have formed much later. This conjecture is not an excuse for Hardcore's hyper-masculine and often homophobic aggression. Nor is it a cover for sometimes short sided lyrical content with songs

⁹ Nault, Curran. *Queercore: Queer Punk Media Subculture*. Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2017. Accessed December 3, 2020. ProQuest Ebook Central. Pg. 19.

¹⁰ Darms, Lisa, ed. *The Riot Grrrl Collection*. New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 2013. Accessed December 3, 2020. ProQuest Ebook Central. Pg. 9.

like *Guilty of Being White* that may have had good intentions but end up falling flat.¹¹ To combat a complexly unjust and aggressively capitalist society, American Hardcore Punk attempts to match or exceed the internalizing amount of aggression. That aggression is embodied in the sound and visually poignant artwork of Cro-Mags 1986 album *The Age of Quarrel*.



Figure 2 – Cro-Mags, *the Age of Quarrel*, Album cover artwork, 1986.

THE PROJECT

So, what the fuck does all of this have to do with ice cream? One tangible reason to use ice cream is because of its link to the story of Henry Rollins quitting his 50 hour a week job at Häagen-Dazs to join Black Flag.¹² This story comes up as part of the mythos surrounding him and encompasses a collective urge to say fuck you to the man, aka the powers that be aka a mundane hourly wage job where you are told what to do. But a class project cannot just revolve

¹¹ Versobooks.com. “Ian MacKaye Now and Then: Wugazi and ‘Guilty of Being White.’” Accessed December 3, 2020. <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/641-ian-mackaye-now-and-then-wugazi-and-guilty-of-being-white>.

¹² Blush, Steven. *American Hardcore: A Tribal History*. Port Townsend: Feral House, 2010. Accessed December 2, 2020. ProQuest Ebook Central. Pg. 103.

around one person's story in the entire history of Hardcore Punk. Instead, our project is about each of us and our experiences with personal interest, academia, and various expression forms. We are a bunch of strangers in a graduate school class at a private university who have never spoken in person for the entire semester because we are stuck in a series of video calls due to a global pandemic. You know, experimental humanities. We are forming as a loose collective for a brief but hopefully productive moment in history.

I empathize with Hardcore Punk music as a motivation to confront apathy. I graduated with an art degree from a state university in 2008 as the country was going into recession. I was unhappy. Our collective Future Death Toll formed out a need to stick together and survive during uncertain times. DIY or DIE. We met in college, and after we graduated, we skipped town (Lincoln, NE) and headed from Portland, OR. We left behind the alienation we felt in the Midwest and thought we would be able to start anew. During that time, many young people were moving to Portland because it was relatively cheap and had an art scene that was more than just a few disparate venues and people.

The Portland we went on to experience was very white, reasonably affluent, and incredibly insular. Dishwashing jobs received hundreds of applicants. Gentrification was in full swing there as it is in most "artsy" parts of the country. I would later learn that Oregon was founded with the propose of creating a whites-only state.¹³ I am white, which has privilege assigned to it. As an artist, I believe I have a responsibility to understand the privilege I have to figure out how that responsibility shapes the work that I make.

¹³ opb. "A Racist History Shows Why Oregon Is Still so White." Accessed December 3, 2020. <https://www.opb.org/news/article/oregon-white-history-racist-foundations-black-exclusion-laws/>.



Figure 3 & 4 – *ice cream headache*, digital video, Camera Operator Elizabeth Lamb, 2020.

In our class project, I am exploring themes of gender, race, and debt through moving images. In *ice cream headache* and *i scream shower* I have vanilla ice cream cones. In the first video, I attempt to eat ice cream, a Halloween skull mask that has no opening in the mouth. I repeatedly drop the ice cream as I try to consume it, leaving the ice cream covered in the dirt and leaves. Frustrated, I toss the cone and its remnants into the air a few times until the melted treat falls apart.

In *i scream shower*, I step into a tub with water spraying down from the showerhead. The skull mask hangs behind like the grim reaper over my shoulder. I am wearing red lipstick, fishnets, and pink latex gloves. I have two ice cream cones that I am clutching in each hand that quickly begin to dissolve as the rushing water makes contact with them. I hurry to try to eat the desserts before they are washed away completely as I move frantically in and out of the hot water stream. I get down to the waffle cones and crush them and shove everything left into my mouth only to regurgitate it moments later. I pick up the camcorder to zoom in on the remnants floating in the water below near the clogged drain.



Figure 5 – *i scream shower*, digital video, 2020.

On December 3rd, 2020, I debuted *promissory note/cancel debt* for the first annual Tisch Fringe Festival.¹⁴ My contribution read as follows: Debt has a controlling interest in higher education. Wage stagnation maintains a system of exploitation among hourly laborers. Live paycheck to paycheck or be crushed by debt. Maybe both at the same time. While the promise of a good job or a living wage continues to remain just outside your grasp. Control is maintained by a series of devices that prey on our bodies' physical and psychological parts. How we maintain a sense of control depends upon our perception of reality. a floor mat for comfort a floor mat for control a format for comfort a format for control a toll for comfort a toll for control How much do you currently owe? How much will you owe after you graduate? Debt becomes an archive. A series of transactions and promissory notes. There is no comfort in debt. When debt takes control, there is a toll.

¹⁴ "Tisch Fringe Fest Fall 2020." Accessed December 3, 2020. <https://tisch.nyu.edu/performing-arts/events/tisch-fringe-fest-fall-2020>.

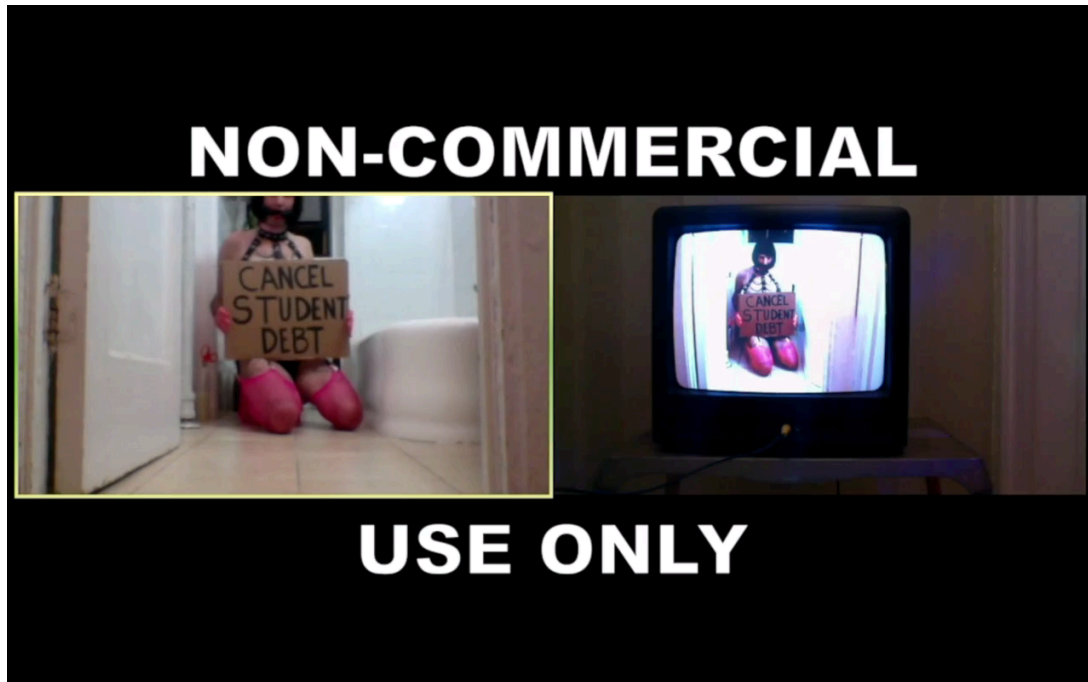


Figure 6 – promissory note/cancel debt, digital video, 2020.

since my proposal was accepted, i have gained additional student loans. once this festival is over, that debt will increase. what i owe will continue to grow as time marches beyond this festival and my pending graduation. the agreement to pay up provides a one-sided peace of mind while the student is left with the burden to pay it all back.

In *DEBT FREE DEATH*, I am again dressed in a suit with the skull mask on my face. I embody death as I read a book titled *Death* as I sit on a log in the park. From a bright orange bag with a jack o lantern face on it, I pull out two signs with stakes that resemble the political yards signs as the election draws near. Both yard signs have the words “CAPITALISM DOES NOT CARE” printed on them. I stick them in the ground and pick up a cardboard sign that reads “DEBT FREE DEBT.” Current law allows any debt you have to be transferred to a next of kin to make sure your debts are paid in full even after you die. I skip and swing the sign from side to side and throw it in the air to let the cardboard flutter as it flies down back to earth.



Figure 7 - DEBT FREE DEATH, MiniDV video, Camera Operator Honey McMoney, 2020.

I feel like a failure often. For the majority of my adult life, I have lived paycheck to paycheck. The majority of jobs I have held require many hours of standing with repetitive labor. A boss that does not care about raises and does not want to hear about cost-of-living increases. I understand that there are people out there who have it much worse than me. I am lucky to be in a private university graduate program, but I am also feeding a system built on debt collection in exchange for an education. I resisted going back to school because I was determined to be an artist who held an hourly wage job to pay the bills and make art by any means. Even after I had experienced my uncle (who was a successful artist) die in debt. However, at a certain point, my body started to get tired of the heavy lifting. I got fired from the last job I had right before I was accepted to go back to school. I have had imposter syndrome for nearly the entire time I have been enrolled at New York University.

This is who I am, and this is who you want me to be.

I have been shaped by my experiences with society.

Your institutions are molds that are impressed on me.

I don't feel like I belong in my program, but I love archiving. I think preserving flashes of creativity, oral histories, or traces of human thought and experience is fascinating. I think I could be good at it. We read a lot of oral history in American Hardcore Punk because that is one of the most effective ways to understand something when you were not there to experience. Reading from Keith Morris' autobiography¹⁵ you get a first-hand experience into a mindset of what he thought and felt and how he existed in a time that is no longer in the present. How hard it was to be a band and live within a hostile time and space.

One of the final takeaways from American Hardcore Punk is that we cannot reasonably expect a single moment of artistic expression to solve all of society's problems. The majority of American Hardcore Punk outfits did not see themselves as an intentional political movement but rather a reaction to their personal and social conditions. But regardless of how we label this time in history, some fragments exist for us to find to draw inspiration for change. We need failure more than we know. We must embrace collective and individual failures to learn from them genuinely. Sometimes white people need to shut the fuck up and listen or even get out of the way. Ultimately, sustained and brief moments of resistance can build on a collective struggle to change cultural norms and fight systemic injustice.

¹⁵ Morris, Keith. *My Damage: The Story of a Punk Rock Survivor*. Boulder: Da Capo Press, 2016. Accessed December 3, 2020. ProQuest Ebook Central.

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